



Florida Greenways and Trails Council (FGTC) March 2024 Council Meeting Day 1 Minutes

PUBLIC MEETING: March 27, 2024
TIME: 9:00 am
LOCATION: Garden Center of Winter Haven

FGTC Members in Attendance for Council Meeting:

- Brooks White – Florida Forest Service
- Chip Birdsong – Florida Department of State
- Dale Allen – Senate President Appointed Greenway User
- Danielle Terrell – Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP)
- Jason Lauritsen – Senate President Appointed Greenway User
- Jim Couillard – Local Government Representative
- Kathy Burke – Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
- Mike Stephens – Governor Appointed Trail User
- President Andy Gardiner – Senate President Appointed Trail User
- Rep. Cindy Stevenson – Speaker of the House Appointed Trail User
- Rep. James Buchanan – Speaker of the House Appointed Trail User
- Robin Birdsong – Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)
- Scott Stryker – Governor Appointed Greenway User
- Shawn Thomas – U.S. Department of Agriculture
- Stephanie Wardein – Governor Appointed Private Landowner
- Tara McCue (Delegate for Chris Rietow) – Regional Planning Council Representative
- Traci Deen – Speaker of the House Appointed Greenway User

Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) Staff in Attendance for Council Meeting:

- Samantha Browne, Bureau Chief
- Britney Mulholland, Assistant Bureau Chief
- Katie White, Regional Coordinator
- Justin Baldwin, Regional Coordinator
- Anna Hopkins, Regional Coordinator

Approve Agenda

FGTC REMARKS: N/A

MOTION: Mike Stephens

SECOND: Robin Birdsong

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve agenda.

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

Approve the December 2023 Meeting Summary

FGTC REMARKS:

Dale Allen asked if there would be time to discuss the meaning of regionally significant trails during the meeting. Jim Couillard confirmed Samantha Browne would be talking about that in the Trail Ranking Introduction presentation.

MOTION: Kathy Burke

SECOND: Danielle Terrell

FGTC RECOMMENDATION:

Approve meeting summary.

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

Regional Trail Ranking Introduction

Samantha Browne (SB) explained that “regionally significant trails” as identified in SB106 are the regional trails identified in the Florida Greenways and Trails System (FGTS) Priority layer. Dale Allen (DA) asked for clarification on how this decision was reached and if it was decided by the staff. SB clarified that the language in the bill is very similar to the language used in the Florida Greenways and Trails System Plan when talking about regional trails, and that this was discussed at the December 2023 Council meeting. Jim Couillard (JC) confirmed that the meaning of regionally significant trails was discussed amongst the Council. DA expressed concern that the Florida Wildlife Corridor was not considered enough and that without clear criteria the 14 trails will be ranked subjectively. SB reminded the Council that they were here today to rank the trails since SB106 directs the Council to prioritize the regionally significant trails and provided a summary of the rankings that happened in 2015-2016. SB explained that the Council would be hearing from representatives from all 14 of the Regional Trails.

SB reminded the Council that status maps, presentations, and letters of support for all the trails were uploaded to the Council portal. SB presented summary information for all 14 trails showing their percentage complete/programmed/unfunded, the number of recreation sites that each trail intersects with (using data from the Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory), the number of REDI (Rural Economic Development Initiative) counties each trail crosses through, and lastly the number of Trail Towns located along each trail.

Following this summary, Mike Stephens (MS) read the criteria for regionally significant trails verbatim from SB106. SB noted that the language in the FGTS Plan is very similar. Scott Stryker (SS) asked if the Council would be ranking all the trails from 1 through 14. SB answered yes and explained the Council may decide to vote to keep the Coast-to-Coast Trail (C2C) and St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop (SJR2C) as the number one and number two priorities before hearing the presentations.

MS made a motion to keep C2C as priority #1 and SJR2C as priority #2. Traci Deen (TD) seconded the motion.

Before voting on the motion, council members began further discussion. SS disagreed with keeping C2C and SJR2C as priorities and contended that other regional trails should be given a chance for more funding and focus. MS stated that he believed the intent of the legislation was to complete trail gaps and thinks it is best to leave C2C and SJR2C as priorities until asphalt is on the ground. He added that it would not hurt funding to the other trails to keep these two priorities. Robin Birdsong (RB) proposed that the Council should hear the 14 presentations before deciding on the #1 and #2 priorities.

DA expressed concern about criteria for the ranking and the meaning of substantially complete. It was his understanding that the original ranking of the C2C and SJR2C as #1 and #2 meant that they were guaranteed for completion by FDOT. He also stated that it would be difficult to compare the trails for ranking since some are well established and others are new.

JC stated it would be beneficial to focus on completing trails and that the legislation seemed to point to finishing projects. He cautioned against spreading funding out amongst too many projects but also understood both sides.

Stephanie Wardein asked if the Council would have the opportunity to hear about achievability for each trail regarding closing gaps and completion. SB clarified that the Regional Trail presenters were asked to speak to that. DA would like more information about the trails, such as achievability and ROW acquisitions.

JC restated the existing motion to keep the C2C and SJR2C as #1 and #2 priorities. MS reiterated why he supported the motion. SB suggested letting presenters give their presentation first and then having the Council decide on C2C and SJR2C. RB further explained that the ranking is only one thing considered when SUN trail funding is distributed. DA stated again that it was his understanding that the original ranking of C2C and SJR2C as #1 and #2 ensured they would be funded to 100% completion. He also asked if the rest of the rankings below the top two held any weight. RB informed the Council that FDOT is committed to completing the C2C and SJR2C as well as protecting other public investments which have been distributed statewide.

TD reminded the Council that their role is only to advise FDOT and the ranking today will have little impact on what FDOT ultimately decides to fund. Since C2C and SJR2C are well on their way to completion, the Council should continue to prioritize them in their advisements. DA again stated he is looking for clear, objective criteria on which to rank the trails.

Shawn Thomas (ST) asked how unpaved components of the FGTS are considered in FDOT's new funding from SB106. He believes that SB106 seems to encourage closing gaps in unpaved trail networks. He asked if the Council would have any input on FDOT funding decisions for unpaved trails. SB answered that the purpose of this vote is for FDOT's SUN Trail program only and the

ranking is only in respect to SUN Trail eligible trails. RB added that not every trail in the FGTS Priority network is paved and the trails in the network serve a variety of uses.

TD made a motion to table the C2C and SJR2C discussion and vote until after the presentations are given. Kathy Burke seconded the motion. A majority of the Council members voted to table the vote. Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

Note: DA realized after the vote that he misunderstood the motion. DA was hoping to conclude the discussion and vote on the #1 and #2 priorities before presentations.

Regional Trail Presentations

Representatives from each of the 14 regional trails were given 20 minutes to present. Copies of the presentations may be obtained by contacting Anna Hopkins at anna.e.hopkins@floridadep.gov. Questions and comments asked by Council members (if any) following the presentations are summarized below.

Capital City-to-the Sea Trail (CC2ST)

- Is the Council voting on the whole CC2ST system that was shown during the presentation? Answer: No, the only segments being considered for the ranking are those shown on the provided CC2ST status map and not the other connector trails in the region.
- Is the western side of the CC2ST all public land? Answer: Yes, that portion is all on National Forest land.

Great Northwest Coast Connector

- *No questions*

U.S. 90 Trail

- *No questions*

Coast-to-Coast Trail (C2C)

- Can more information be provided on the gap from Hernando to Sumter that is funded for construction in 2025? Answer: No Sumter County representative was at the meeting to provide specific input. Gallus Quigley from Lake County reiterated that the Lake County gap was fully funded except for construction on one of the last trail phases.
- Is there data on the average distance travelled per trip on the C2C? Answer: The C2C Facebook group shows there are numerous riders completing the entire trail, many doing 50-60 miles a day. There are even shuttle services coming up to get people across the gap. Trip length is also dependent on lodging. In Lake County, they see many users are doing 10–12-mile round trips locally on the trail. The topography in Lake County also attracts professional cyclists who are riding 40+ miles per day.

St. Johns River-to-Sea Loop (SJR2C)

- Can you talk about the alternative trail surfaces Volusia County is exploring for use in wildlife corridors? Answer: Many times conservation lands prohibit asphalt trails and land managers are concerned about the use of heavy machinery. Volusia County is exploring a trail surface material that is webbed and utilized a honeycomb structure to withstand machinery without breaking down that also supports wheelchairs and bicycles. They are currently testing the material on one trail segment. This surface is not compatible with SUN Trail funding, so they are exploring other funding sources.
- Is the northwest corner gap of the SJR2C all within the Florida Wildlife Corridor? Answer: Tim Baylie stated he does not believe that area is within the corridor. There is a road widening project happening in the future which would open opportunities for trail building, but they are looking to secure other funding sooner than that project is planned to close the gap.
- Does the experimental trail surface require special maintenance? Answer: It has not needed any special maintenance so far. It is also used at Wekiva State Park and needed maintenance after about 20 years of being on the ground.
- Are the segments on the SJR2C status map that are labeled with “construction” and a year all set to be built? Answer: That is correct. The percentage complete given during the presentation includes those segments that are funded for construction.

Heart of Florida Loop

- Can you discuss how trails and conservation lands can be compatible? Answer: There is an amazing amount of support and momentum surrounding the Florida Wildlife Corridor right now. The Cross Florida Greenway makes a great showpiece of how a high-use recreation corridor is also conducive to wildlife. Visitation annually is at 3.3 million people, the highest of any state park. At the same time, there is abundant wildlife using the wildlife crossings and surrounding land. Building the Greenway encouraged habitat preservation and restoration. There are already talks about replacing the land bridge to make something even bigger and better for wildlife and people.
- Is the Lake County unfunded/unprogrammed gap dependent on working with the National Forest? Yes, Lake County will need to get easements from the Ocala National Forest, except for in the unincorporated areas where ROWs will have to be worked with. Those areas are underserved with little to no bike/ped infrastructure and will really benefit from a trail coming through.
- The FWC is wildlife-centric and encourages recreation but not for recreation’s sake. It is for the purpose of viewing wildlife. Paved roads in wildlife management areas (WMAs) are not viewed as a good thing. FWC uses a wildlife disturbance model to inform their trail building which may make a good topic for a future Council meeting agenda.
- How much of the HOF is unfunded that does not overlap with the C2C and SJR2C? Answer: About 20%.

Nature Coast Regional Connector

- Is it the intention of the FDEP to manage the Duke energy corridor gap once it is constructed? Answer: The state will manage from the Nature Coast State Trail to the Cross Florida Greenway only.
- Does the southern terminus of the trail connect to the Withlacoochee State Trail/Heart of Florida Loop? Answer: Yes.
- The Dunnellon area has one of the narrowest gaps in the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Thoughtful design of the trail corridor can preserve some connectivity. There have been past discussions with the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation and Marion County about solutions for the area.

Old Florida Regional Connector

- The Putnam County gap in this trail is within the Florida Wildlife Corridor and provides a great opportunity to improve connectivity and wildlife crossings.
- Does the east end of the Old Florida Regional Connector connect to the SJR2C? Answer: Yes.

Caloosahatchee Sugar Trail

- Will FDOT be maintaining the section of the trail on state road? Answer: FDOT will only be performing basic maintenance. They will not be maintaining any facilities. This is an on-road trail which requires much less maintenance than an off-road trail.
- A lot of this trail is roadside. Are there opportunities to go further from the road in some of the gaps? There seems to be a lack of willing local managers. Answer: It is correct that there are no willing managers for parts of the trail. If the trail were to be moved outside of the ROW, then there would be acquisition costs. Lee County is comfortable with keeping the trail in the ROW since there is the understanding with FDOT District 1 that FDOT will maintain it. It is unclear how much Hendry County wants to be involved as they have not shown interest in the trail.
- The growth in Lee County is substantial. There are many trail amenities in the park and preserve areas, plus Babcock Ranch is nearby with a tremendous amount of development and new trail network. This trail is a primary corridor of connectivity to access off-road sections throughout the area.

Florida Gulf Coast Trail (FGCT)

- How do the dynamics in the Lee, Collier, and Charlotte region surrounding post-hurricane resiliency dollars play into the completion of this trail? Answer: The FGCT meets some criteria for resiliency funding. Completing the trail will require pockets of money from many sources such as the city, county, state, and federal resources, including Resilient Lee.
- This is one of the longest regional trails by mileage but there are no Trail Towns. Is there interest from communities along the trail in becoming Trail Towns? Answer: Yes, Bonita is a great candidate for designation. Venice has already applied and completed the site visit and will be designated soon. Trust for Public Land is still working on bringing all counties together along the trail and educating them on programs like Trail Towns. Many

communities are just recently learning about these opportunities and haven't had an advocate at the county level for trail projects.

- There is a ton of growth in this part of the state and more connectivity is needed to help with cycling deaths. There is also the historic Train Depot in Venice not shown on the slides. Answer: There are many historic places along the trail that are being revitalized as trail heads and points of interest such as the Train Depot in Venice. As the trail is completed, it enhances the sense of place and revives communities.
- There is not a lot of overlap between the Florida Wildlife Corridor and the Florida Gulf Coast Trail but there are opportunities for connection. SB106 encouraged connections to the corridor, not just trails within it. What is the urgency for closing gaps in the corridor and for preserving connectivity in fast growing areas? Answer: Local governments have different priorities along the trail. Some counties are more enthusiastic about getting the trail finished than others. Realignment of the trail to lessen land acquisition has helped some counties get more excited about the trail. It is hard to get ahead of development. A future trail coalition would be able to look ahead and see what is coming and prevent missed opportunities.
- The Trust for Public Land recently secured a land purchase along the Seminole Gulf Railway after 4 years of negotiation. Can you disclose how much that was for? Answer: It was \$82 million and there are two years to raise those funds.
- How long is the Trust for Public Land (TPL) committed to spearheading the Gulf Coast Trail? Answer: TPL has strong connections to southwest Florida. There are many TPL stakeholders in the area and they want to see more parks and trails there. TPL will be there as long as needed to finish the trail and move onto another Florida project after.
- Is there a definable spine of the trail? If there is connectivity along the coast, local municipalities can fill in some of the smaller loops along the main spine. Answer: The map of the entire trail indicates all feasible projects. The old map included some segments that were not amenable to trail building which were removed in the latest update.

East Coast Greenway (ECG)

- How can the ECG be ranked when it overlaps with multiple other trails and is so complex? It is very challenging. Answer (from Samantha Browne): During the last ranking the Council split the ECG into two separate trails. This time it is being considered as one trail, but the Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail will be considered separately.

Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail (FKOHT)

- The largest gap in the trail is the 7 Mile bridge. Is anything happening to reopen that? Answer: Unsure, a rehab project may be planned in the future. Bridge projects are expensive and take a long time. It is vital to let elected officials know that the trail is a critical issue amongst locals and visitors.
- This trail deserves special attention as it is one of the most heavily used and dangerous corridors in Florida. The 7-mile bridge offers spectacular wildlife viewing opportunities and wildlife passage for aquatic animals.

- If the FKOHT is ranked and funded is there really no solution for that bridge? Answer: It could be done but it is a large-scale engineering project and the whole bridge would need to be rebuilt.
- Can you clarify what is happening with the other crumbling bridges? Answer: Some of the bridges are beyond repair and crumbling into the ocean. Others are in good enough shape that the damaged portions can be removed around the edge while the center is preserved for pedestrian and cyclist use. The bridges that can be fixed in this way will reopen.
- Are there gaps within the FKOHT that are not bridges? Answer: Most of the gaps are bridges. However, there are parts of the trail on the mainland side that could be improved for safety.

Collier to Polk Regional Trail

- There is a spot in Highlands County that is a vulnerable bottleneck in the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Consideration should be given to combining this trail with conservation lands and connections to the corridor going forward.
- The alignment of the Collier to Polk and the Heartland Trail seems very similar. Why are both trails needed? Answer: The Heartland Trail will be covered in-depth in the next presentation. When looking more closely, the two trails are further apart than they seem on the statewide map.
- The Collier to Polk trail is visionary and we have never seen the likes of it before. This trail is a classic example of a regionally significant trail based on the SB106 language.

Heartland Regional Trail

- *No questions*

Regional Trail Presentations Public Comment

John Strang, a local Winter Haven resident, voiced support for the Old Dixie Trail (part of the Heartland Trail) and thanked the Council for this work promoting and furthering trails.

Patty Huff thanked the Council, DOT, and the State for supporting multi-use trails. She is very excited to see plans for all the regional trails and has cycled on portions of all of them except two. Thanks to the Collier to Polk Trail, those in the southernmost Trail Town of Everglades City will someday be able access the trail system without having to drive to it.

Michelle Avola-Brown spoke on behalf of the Naples Pathway Coalition in Collier County. She stated there are extensive trails in other parts of the state while Collier only has a few completed trails that are not connected. The Paradise Coast Trail is vitally needed and is a part of both the Florida Gulf Coast Trail and the Collier to Polk Regional Trail. There are many cycling deaths in Florida, including one just last week. More trails like the Paradise Coast will improve safety for cyclists who are currently using the road. Collier County has been overlooked for decades and needs safe trails.

Sally Thompson with the Hillsborough Greenways Committee voiced support for the Florida Gulf Coast Trail. An update was just completed on the Hillsborough Greenways and Trails Master Plan which was adopted originally in 1995. Many segments of the FGCT in the Hillsborough area are already in place or proposed. The seven counties that make up the FGCT were involved in the Close the Gaps initiative in 2012 through the Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation. Alongside the Trust for Public Land, the county now has an opportunity to leverage funding and make the FGCT vision come true. Sally has a long history of being involved with trail and acquisition projects in Florida including being involved with the start of the Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation.

Forest Michael echoed earlier comments that the FKOHT deserves special consideration. It is very close to completion and connects many state parks, aquatic supports, and communities. He urges the Council to support finishing the last remaining parts of the trail.

Beth Alden from Walk/Bike Tampa voiced support for the Florida Gulf Coast Trail. The C2C brings the SUN Trail network to the edge of Florida's largest gulf coast city. Moving forward with the FGCT would bring SUN Trail into Tampa and then down through all the gulf communities. It is important not only for locals but for all SUN Trail users to access all the opportunities in Tampa such as the downtown riverwalk, local restaurants, and more. Several segments of the FGCT are already funded for construction or complete, including trail bridges throughout the area. Different stakeholders have been coordinating the different pieces of the puzzle as they come together. This is partly due to the planning groups in the area being part of the oldest alliance of TPOs and MPOs in the state, now called the Suncoast Transportation Planning Alliance. The locals are investing in this trail corridor including the Expressway Authority and other partners.

Council Ranking Discussion & Vote

Jim Couillard encouraged the Council to consider everything they heard today from the 14 unique trails. He highlighted the language in the FGTS Plan that listed Priority network criteria. The earlier tabled motion to keep the C2C and SJR2C as the #1 and #2 priorities (respectively) was brought back on the floor for a vote.

A majority of the Council members voted via raise of hands to keep the C2C and SJR2C as the top two priority trails. Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote. All Council members were then instructed to fill in C2C and SJR2C as #1 and #2 on their scoresheets.

Jason Lauritsen (JL) asked when the trails will be reranked again. As the landscape and other factors change, it would be good to have a framework of how to initiate rankings. Samantha Browne (SB) answered that there is not a set timeline for the rerankings per statute. FDOT can ask the Council for a reranking when needed next, or if the Council feels like a reranking is needed in the future they can coordinate with FDOT and OGT to schedule one. This particular ranking was because of the language in SB106.

Dale Allen (DA) stated that there is no rule for how to rank and bylaws are an arbitrary way to establish a ranking protocol. DA felt that the trails could be more effectively ranked if sorted into categories considering factors such as completeness and the Florida Wildlife Corridor, and then

ranked within those categories. DA raised a motion to do this. There was not a second motion and the motion died.

JL stated that all 14 trails have merit and deserve to be pursued if there were unlimited resources. Will lower ranked trails still be able to get SUN Trail funding through FDOT? SB answered that FDOT would continue to fund projects throughout the state that are ready for construction. For example, some of the trails that were not included in the 2016 ranking have gone on to secure SUN Trail funds and complete projects. With that being said, the ranking may be considered by FDOT if there are two similar projects requesting a similar amount of money. Traci Deen (TD) added that the rankings decided on today are just a recommendation to FDOT, and just one of many things they consider when distributing SUN Trail funding. Robin Birdsong (RB) confirmed TD's summarization was correct. SUN Trail is a statewide funding source and FDOT spreads the money around to fund projects statewide. If all factors are equal, a segment on a higher ranked trail may be funded over a segment on a lower ranked trail. However, there are lots of variables considered with each project.

Mike Stephens (MS) commented that there is usually SUN Trail funding available for projects that are not the top two priorities. RB confirmed that FDOT funds SUN Trail projects outside of the top two trails.

Shawn Thomas restated that he is abstaining from the vote per his agency's guidelines. He asked what would constitute an ask to do another ranking- change in circumstance, opportunity, support, management, funding, etc.? SB answered that those were valid reasons to constitute a reranking.

MS brought up that the FGTS Plan is updated every five years, and the same timeframe could be used for reranking the trails. SB answered that may be an option but would require coordination with FDOT. The ranking today does not affect anything already programmed in the current FDOT five-year SUN Trail work program. Reranking every five years may get too far ahead of FDOT's work program.

JL stated he was asked to evaluate the regional trails considering the Florida Wildlife Corridor and how the trails fit into the geography of the Corridor. Some of the categories he considered were the overlap within the Wildlife Corridor, trail gaps within the Corridor not yet programmed, permeability enhancement opportunities, Corridor gap connection opportunities, and the level of potential connectivity between the trail gaps in the Corridor. The two trails that scored highest for him in relation to the Corridor were the Collier to Polk Trail and the Nature Coast Regional Connector. The Heart of Florida Loop and Heartland Trail also stood out due to the urgency surrounding land development and the geometry of the Corridor.

DA commented that JL's evaluation did not account for acquisition. Areas that are critical connections for the Corridor may not be conducive to trail building due to land acquisition costs or ROW concerns.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Council members were directed to fill out their ranking sheets and turn them in for calculation. Any member who did not rank C2C and SJR2C in the #1 and #2 positions were asked to correct their selections to ensure their #1 and #2 trails reflected the earlier majority vote of the council. Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote. The rankings were announced at the conclusion of the meeting as follows:

1. Coast-to-Coast Trail
2. St Johns River-to-Sea Loop
3. Heart of Florida Loop
4. Florida Gulf Coast Trail
5. Collier to Polk Trail
6. Capital City-to-the-Sea Trail
7. Florida Keys Overseas Heritage Trail
8. Nature Coast Regional Connector
9. East Coast Greenway
10. Heartland Regional Trail
11. Old Florida Regional Connector
12. Great Northwest Coast Connector
13. Caloosahatchee-Sugar Trail
14. US 90 Trail Corridor

Note: Ranking calculations were verified for accuracy after meeting adjournment.

ADJOURN:

MOTION: Cyndi Stevenson

SECOND: Dale Allen



Florida Greenways and Trails Council (FGTC) March 2024 Council Meeting Day 2 Minutes

PUBLIC MEETING: March 28, 2024
TIME: 9:00 am
LOCATION: Garden Center of Winter Haven

FGTC Members in Attendance for Council Meeting:

- Brooks White – Florida Forest Service
- Chip Birdsong – Florida Department of State
- Dale Allen – Senate President Appointed Greenway User
- Danielle Terrell – Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- Jason Lauritsen – Senate President Appointed Greenway User
- Jim Couillard – Local Government Representative
- Kathy Burke – Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
- Mike Stephens – Governor Appointed Trail User
- Rep. Cindy Stevenson – Speaker of the House Appointed Trail User
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- Robin Birdsong – Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT)
- Scott Stryker – Governor Appointed Greenway User
- Shawn Thomas – U.S. Department of Agriculture
- Tara McCue (Delegate for Chris Rietow) – Regional Planning Council Representative
- Traci Deen – Speaker of the House Appointed Greenway User

Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) Staff in Attendance for Council Meeting:

- Samantha Browne, Bureau Chief
- Britney Mulholland, Assistant Bureau Chief
- Katie White, Regional Coordinator
- Justin Baldwin, Regional Coordinator
- Anna Hopkins, Regional Coordinator

Approve Agenda

FGTC REMARKS: Jim Couillard proposed that the Council add an agenda item to briefly review the ranking results. The Council agreed and the below members put forth and seconded a motion to add an agenda item.

MOTION: Dale Allen

SECOND: Robin Birdsong

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Add agenda item to review voting results.

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

The below members put forth and seconded a motion to approve the newly amended agenda.

MOTION: Dale Allen

SECOND: Rep. James Buchanan

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve amended agenda.

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

Ranking Review

Jim Couillard (JC) announced that the Council members were provided with a printed list of the verified rankings at their seat. The verification of the rankings showed there were no calculation errors so the rankings from yesterday remained unchanged.

Dale Allen (DA) asked if it was definitively decided how often the trails would be reranked. Samantha Browne reminded the council that the discussion left off yesterday with the suggestion that the Office of Greenways and Trails coordinate with FDOT every five years when the FGTS Plan is updated to see if they would like to request a rerank. DA stated he would like to discuss that further at the next Council meeting and determine a way for the Council to request a rerank without FDOT's request.

Bylaws Update & Vote

Samantha Browne and Anna Hopkins (AH) restated the bylaw changes that were proposed at the December Council meeting. Dale Allen (DA) asked if delegates/alternates can vote at Council meetings. Jim Couillard (JC) stated that the information sent to Council members ahead of the meetings provides enough information for a Council member to discern how they would like to vote and then convey their voting intent to their delegate. AH read an excerpt from the bylaws which state that a Council member may designate an alternate to represent him or her as a voting member of the Council. DA expressed concern that Council member Andy Gardiner may not have been aware that he could have designated an alternate prior to leaving the meeting yesterday before voting on the trail ranking.

DA asked if the changes to the bylaws regarding a conflict of interest were sparked by a specific incident. JC and SB answered that there was no incident, the update was just to eliminate the requirement to submit a memo before the meeting as long as the conflict is announced verbally at the meeting.

FGTC REMARKS: N/A

MOTION: Traci Deen

SECOND: Mike Stephens

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve updated bylaws.

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

Lake Whales Update

Stephanie-Grace Lutton, Parks and Recreation Director, and Eric Marshall, Communications and Engagement Director, provided an update on trails and recreation advancements in Lake Wales. Topics covered included an overview of the city's various planning documents including Lake Wales Connected, Lake Wales Envisioned, and the Big Green Network along with Lake Wales' history as a "City in a Garden" and how 1930's designs and plans for the city are still relevant today. They also discussed current accomplishments such as new job creation, neighborhood revitalization, and bus stop improvements as well as trail and grant accomplishments including the Park Avenue, Kiwanis Park, and 3rd Street trail projects, the Northwest Neighborhood sidewalk project, hazard mitigation at City Hall, and the Lake Wales Soccer Complex. The presentation ended with a synopsis of the redesign and rebranding of the newly opened Lake Wales Family Recreation Center.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Stephanie-Grace and Eric answered questions from the Council regarding the Lake Wales updates.

Acreage Pines Designation and Vote

OGT Regional Coordinator Katie White presented the Designation of Acreage Pines Natural Area to the Council after giving a brief recap of what the Designation program is for the benefit of newer Council members. Acreage Pines Natural Area is a roughly 124-acre property located in Palm Beach County that is owned and managed by the County. Allowable activities include nature viewing, walking, jogging, and horseback riding. Some amenities at the property include picnic areas, an observation platform and boardwalk, and bike racks. The primary purpose of Acreage Pines Natural Area is preservation of wildlife population, native vegetation, and local groundwater resources. Secondary purposes include recreation, environmental education, and scientific research. The property connects to the FGTS Opportunity network.

The Council was provided with the Acreage Pines application prior to the meeting for review.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Council comments and questions clarified that Designation of the Acreage Pines Natural Area would not necessarily prevent future development, but it would provide recognition of the ongoing conservation efforts and give the County some additional points on state recreation grants.

FGTC REMARKS: N/A

MOTION: Robin Birdsong

SECOND: Tara McCue

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: Approve Acreage Pines Designation Application

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

Main Street/City of Winter Haven

Anita Strang, President, gave an update on Main Street Winter Haven and what they have been working on surrounding growth, safety, and functional aesthetics. New dining concepts, rental units, and condo units will be coming to the city over the next three years to the downtown and

surrounding area. Winter Haven's designation as a Trail Town and their overall support for recreation is leading to innovative programs such as new bikes being given to those who move into affordable apartments and bike rental coupons being given to attendees of local conferences. New signage was also recently put up to recognize the historic downtown region. The City Works Xpo is coming up in Winter Haven on May 9th and 10th.

Andy Palmer, the Parks Planning & Strategic Initiatives Manager for the City of Winter Haven, gave an update on trails. The presentation included Winter Haven's connection to Lake Alfred via the Chain of Lakes Trail and then further connection to the future Old Dixie Trail which would link to the Coast-to-Coast trail. Winter Haven celebrated their Trail Town status in February of 2023 with a community event and ski show. Ongoing trail projects at Lake Howard, Lake Elbert, and Lake Conine were highlighted including Complete Street enhancements and the expansion of the South Lake Howard Nature Park. The presentation concluded with an update on the Chain of Lakes Park Phase II and a timeline of Winter Haven's trail planning initiatives from the 1990s through 2024.

Council members shared comments and questions with Anita and Andy at the conclusion of their presentations.

Sunshine Law Overview

Toni Sturtevant (TS), FDEP General Counsel, provided an overview of the Sunshine Law and how it would apply to Council members. Anytime two or more members of the Council are discussing Council business it should be publicly noticed. All scheduled Council meetings fit this requirement, but there will be times that Council members find themselves together outside of a scheduled meeting due to the nature of Council members working in similar fields. There are penalties for breaking the Sunshine Law including but not limited to fines. Administrative non-business details may be discussed, such as meeting dates, but other discussions should not happen or only happen with OGT staff, not other Council members. Toni offered to meet with any member who had questions about the Sunshine Law and review the statute with them together. Another resource for Council members is the Florida Commission on Ethics' hotline.

Jason Lauritsen (JL) expressed interest in meeting with Toni before the future appointment of another Florida Wildlife Corridor representative to the Council. TS stated she is happy to meet with Council members but cautioned she will not be able to absolve anyone. She can help members work through the fact pattern to feel comfortable in their decisions related to the Sunshine Law.

Rep. Cindy Stevenson asked about ex parte disclosure requirements. TS answered that the types of ex parte requirements she was referring to are usually in place because of bylaws held by different groups. The Council does not have any bylaws relating to ex parte, so instead the basic code of ethics should be used accordingly.

Dale Allen (DA) asked if there was a definition of "council business". TS answered that there is not one defined in statute. TS advised that discussing Council vote results with other Council

members should only happen at public meetings. Looking at the agenda of the meeting would also help define council business. She cautioned against defining it too narrowly. DA expressed concern that defining it too broadly would infringe on the right to free speech. It is his opinion that discussing decisions made at a Council meeting outside of the meeting would be appropriate.

Danielle Terrell (DT) commented that in her experience leading several boards and councils, she would consider council business to be anything that can foreseeably come before the Council. She cautioned against talking about voting results outside of meetings in the case that the same vote or topic may come before the Council again in the future.

Traci Deen echoed DT's remarks and stated that the Sunshine Law is meant to be very simple-anything the Council could contemplate or discuss should not be discussed between members non-publicly. If a member desires to be an advocate for something the Council would consider/vote on and wants to lobby other Council members, perhaps sitting on the Council is not the best role for them.

Tara McCue asked for clarification on whether delegates could freely converse with the Council member they represent. TS said there is no issue with that.

Shawn Thomas commented that if there are any topics that need to be discussed between two or more Council members, it would be appropriate to add that topic to the next meeting agenda.

Chair and Vice Chair Election

Current Council Chair Jim Couillard stated he would be finishing up his appointment to the Council in April and is not eligible to serve more terms. He has enjoyed his six years as a Council member.

Nominations were opened for Council Chair.

MOTION: Danielle Terrell made a motion to elect Mike Stephens as the new Chair.

SECOND: Jason Lauritsen

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: The Council voted in support of electing Mike Stephens as the new Chair. Mike accepted.

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

Nominations were opened for Council Vice Chair.

MOTION: Jim Couillard made a motion to elect Traci Deen as Vice Chair.

SECOND: Mike Stephens

FGTC RECOMMENDATION: The Council voted in support of electing Traci Deen as the new Vice Chair. Traci accepted.

Note: Shawn Thomas abstained from the vote.

OGT Update/Confirm Next Meeting Date:

Samantha Browne (SB) gave an update on SB 1638 from the 2024 session which gives \$36 million to the Florida Park Service, \$4 million of which is to go to OGT for establishing a grant program for local trail maintenance. Council member and State Representative James Buchanan was instrumental in the passing of the legislation. The grant is for the operation and maintenance of trails within the FGTS, and preference will be given to projects within the Florida Wildlife Corridor and projects where the local government is willing to cost share (not a requirement for communities within a designated Rural Area of Opportunity). The grants may not be used for the design or construction of trails. The grant program is still in development and further details will be shared when finalized.

Danielle Terrell (DT) shared that it is expected the first cycle of applications will open in August with the potential to have more cycles depending on how much money is distributed. There is also reporting required of FDEP associated with the grant program. FDEP is excited about the new program.

Rep. James Buchanan stated that this bill is a great example of the legislature making a commitment to preserve Florida's natural resources. There were a lot of moving parts to get the bill passed including uncertainty throughout the legislative session regarding gaming compact revenues and related litigation. The bill dedicates 96% of the revenue sharing to preserving natural resources in the state. The bill outlines certain amounts or percentages of the revenue to be specifically dedicated to the Florida Wildlife Corridor and conservation, maintenance of lands and invasive species, the state's resiliency program, and water quality improvement. Speaker Renner and Senate President Passidomo deserve a lot of thanks for making the bill a reality.

Rep. Cyndi Stevensen (CS) asked what the reporting and accountability requirements related to the grant program would be. Toni Sturtevant stated that the grant program is statutorily implemented but there is no associated rule-making authority. CS asked how the grant will be implemented with no criteria. DT answered that many things are still being figured out since the program is so new, but a first-come first-serve model is being considered. SB added that other grants are already administered within FDEP without a rule and those programs have existing standards, forms, and resources that will be fine tuned for this program.

Mike Stephens commented that Volusia County has trail maintenance well figured out. Dale Allen agreed with this and shared that Volusia County recently presented to the Florida Greenways and Trails Foundation Board about their research into trail maintenance. He suggested having representatives from local governments who would be applying for the grant program present at a future Council meeting.

CS asked if there is any ability to make the grant needs based. SB answered that OGT would be following the criteria that is set up in the statute, including the direction of which applicants get

priority. DT added that the grant program may change and evolve after the first cycle of applications once it becomes clearer what kinds of projects are being submitted.

SB announced that the previously suggested date for the June Council meeting would need to be adjusted due to conflicts. A poll will be sent out to Council members to determine a new summer meeting date.

Public Comment:

No public comments.

Council Updates:

Kathy Burke: FWC recently held the dedication for the bald cypress boardwalk at the J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Palm Beach. It was a five-year effort and multi-phase project that included restrooms, new trails, pavilions, and other facilities/amenities. The WMA is used by many school groups and youth camps, so it features more facilities than most WMAs. You can also see endangered species on the property at certain times of year.

Traci Deen: No updates to share.

Brooks: No updates to share.

Mike Stephens: Work is almost done on a segment of the North Lake River to Hills Trail with construction taking place this year. A meeting is upcoming with representatives from the US Forest Service and the Florida Forest Service to discuss a route through the Ocala National Forest. Leesburg submitted a SUN trail request to extend the Tav-Lee trail over to Leesburg. The 2nd segment of the Sugar Loaf Mountain trail should start soon. Lots of good things are happening for trails in Lake County.

Jason Lauritsen: Would like to have a presentation about the FWC's Wildlife Disturbance Model at a future meeting. On April 19th the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation will host the first of a series of workshops aimed at identifying certain urgent gaps in the Corridor that are due to land conversion rates and corridor geometry. Marion, Volusia, Lake, Orange, and Collier counties have been invited to participate in the next round. These meetings are not open to the public but if anyone is interested in being involved, they can reach out to Jason.

Chip Birdsong: During the last legislative session, the Department of State got a line item to create a Main Street application which is currently in production. It should come online in July.

Robin Birdsong: FDOT is making substantial movement working through the new reporting requirements imposed in 2023's SB106. A kickoff was held earlier in March to begin the SUN Trail Network inventory project. The network includes many kinds of trails with over 4,500 miles envisioned for many different purposes. Another requirement from SB106 was monetary reporting on trail use. FDOT is working with different partners and surveying trail visitors. FDOT

has purchased 45 new trail counters to be installed within the network around the state. Robin also shared statistics regarding SUN Trail funding since the inception of the program and monetary figures relating to the current work program.

Rep. Cyndi Stevenson: Suggested that staff have different colored name tags at Council meetings. Noted the value of trail surveys to understand user needs. She personally uses the Palatka to St. Augustine Trail a lot and has noticed a need to work on litter and shade along the trail.

Danielle Terrell: Besides the new grant program, the \$32 million dedicated to Florida State Parks in SB1638 will be used for land management. This will be a huge help for the Park Service which have had to pull funding from other sources to cover costs. The new funding must be used within a 12-month period, so FDEP is working on identifying projects to prioritize. They would like to complete as many projects as possible while being good stewards of the money to encourage repeat funding in future years.

Rep. James Buchanan: No updates to share.

Scott Stryker: No updates to share.

Shawn: Thank you Jim for being the Chair this past year and your contributions to the Council. The USFS has a new Forest Supervisor for National Forests in Florida. Within the Florida Trail Program, Jenna Taylor is the new Deputy Administrator. Okaloosa County has recently put \$1 million into their budget to support the development and planning of a bridge over the Yellow River which closes a 20-mile gap in the Florida Trail. The USFS will work with them on cost share agreements and coordinating the partnerships between the Water Management District and Eglin Air Force Base.

Dale Allen: Asked if the numbers shared by Robin earlier included acquisition of ROW. Robin responded that she would need to verify, but if they were included it was a small amount. He is very concerned with the cost of acquisition for a project like the Florida Gulf Coast Trail which includes very little ROW. Without criteria he believes the Council is doing things irrationally and they must do better if they intend to create an interconnected statewide trail system. The Council can't continue proceeding how they are now.

Adjourn:

FGTC REMARKS:

MOTION: Representative Cyndi Stevenson

SECOND: Dale Allen